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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHJM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHIC/ORG OF ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 4839
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 9952
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 4343

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000017

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR JHARRIS AND MBLONG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/05/2019

TAGS: [IS](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI CLERIC CROSSES THE LINE ON GAZA

REF: RIYADH 1871

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Classified By: DCM David Rundell for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- Saudi authorities arrested Sheikh Awad al-Qarni after he issued an internet "fatwa" urging followers to retaliate against Israel and Israeli interests. Authorities reportedly moved al-Qarni to Riyadh following the arrest in his home city of Abha, southwest Saudi Arabia.

-- The website al-Rasid (www.alrasid.com) broke the story December 31. Conflicting internet reports suggested that al-Qarni remained free, but Embassy contacts have confirmed the arrest. The Saudi government has not commented officially.

-- A group of Mecca scholars that included university professors and magistrates called for support of Hamas, terming resistance against Israel as "Sharia-justified jihad."

(C) COMMENT

-- International media widely reported al-Qarni's comments. While some reports have described al-Qarni as a "prominent cleric," in fact he appeals to a narrower slice of society with conservative-to-extremist leanings. On Gaza, many Saudis would probably agree with his comments even if most would not act on them. In contrast, a larger portion of society will likely follow the statements of the Mecca scholars more seriously.

-- The Saudi government's reaction to al-Qarni's comments is a clear message that the SAG will not tolerate those who incite violence, even in the context of the Palestinian cause. Al-Qarni's detention will likely be short, but will serve to remind he and his peers that their rhetoric is being monitored.

End Key Points and Comment.

¶1. (U) In a message published on multiple websites, al-Qarni called December 28 for violent retaliation on Israeli

interests: "All (Israeli) interests, and anything else related to Israel, are permitted targets for Muslims everywhere.... They (Israelis) should become targets. Their blood should be shed as the blood of our brothers in Palestine has been shed.... They should feel pain more than our brothers." Though Al-Qarni characterized his call as a "fatwa," or religious ruling, the statement has no official standing in Saudi Arabia, where only the Council of Senior Ulama or the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia are permitted to issue official religious rulings (Reftel).

¶2. (C) The Saudi Ministry of Interior (MOI) reportedly arrested al-Qarni in his home city of Abha. Reports conflict, but the arrest likely occurred late December 29, one day after al-Qarni's call went public. The SAG has not commented publicly on the arrest. However, an MOI official told the Charge d'Affaires January 3 that al-Qarni had "probably been released by now."

¶3. (C) On December 31 a group of prominent Mecca scholars, including several magistrates and professors at Umm al-Qura religious university, issued a statement urging Muslims and Arab governments to support Hamas. The statement declared that "what is being done by the valiant Islamic resistance, represented by the elected Palestinian government and by the Islamic resistance movement HAMAS, and by the various Islamic resistance movements in the occupied land of Palestine, is Sharia-permitted Jihad..."

¶4. (C) Al-Qarni formerly worked as a professor at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University and has a history of taking anti-U.S. positions. In 2004, he signed a petition supporting "holy war" against the United States in Iraq. Al-Qarni is well-known in the Kingdom, yet the Mecca

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scholars' comments will likely be given more weight by most observers.
FRAKER